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The Gaza Strip: A Primer

SUMMARY

While the Camp David accords treat Gaza and the West Bank together, the realities of the two areas are quite different. For example, an estimated 80 percent of Gaza's more than 400,000 residents are Palestinian refugees--or their offspring. About 44 percent of the West Bank's 700,000 residents are refugees. Gaza is also a political anomaly. Once a district of Palestine, the area has since 1948 been a dubious spoil of war detached from any larger entity. Today Israel administers Gaza, but it does not regard it in the same emotional or historical light as the West Bank. Nevertheless, Israel, for security reasons, believes it must retain a military presence in Gaza for the indefinite future. Egypt advances no claim to sovereignty over Gaza, yet it considers Gaza its responsibility because of its former role as administrator of the territory.

President Sadat's search for creditable Palestinian residents of the West Bank and Gaza to participate in negotiations to establish a local self-governing entity has so far been unsuccessful. The traditional Gazan elite--led by members of the Shawwa clan--is tempted by the offer of autonomy, but it is shackled by refugee support for the Palestine Liberation Organization, which opposes the accords. Political dynamics in Gaza are essentially a struggle between these two groups. The PLO hardliners so far have the upper hand on the question of negotiations by reason of their numbers and their ability to intimidate opponents.

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Under the terms of the framework agreement for a Middle East peace reached at Camp David, the initial goal for Gaza and the West Bank is autonomy. The first step is agreement on the means for establishing a self-governing authority. Once that authority is established through elections, the Israeli military government and its civilian administration are to be withdrawn. At that point negotiations are to begin to determine the final status of Gaza and the West Bank. That problem is to be resolved within five years.

President Sadat talks of negotiating a comprehensive settlement with Israel, even if King Husayn of Jordan "does not accept his responsibility." Sadat's meaning is vague, but he presumably intends, at least, to see that a local self-governing entity is established in Gaza, where he can legitimately claim to play a role. Success will depend on Sadat's finding local Arabs willing to participate in the negotiations.

No individuals who have a credible political base in Gaza have so far come forward. We believe, however, that there are Gaza politicians who are tempted to do so. It is, therefore, possible that Sadat will be able to proceed with negotiations for the autonomy of Gaza, offering the results as a model for what might be achieved on the West Bank. This memorandum is intended to serve as a primer on the Gaza Strip in anticipation of negotiations to resolve its status.

History

Before 15 May 1948 the Gaza district of Palestine, comprised the entire southern half of the country, and as a part of Palestine was administered by the United Kingdom under a mandate from the League of Nations. On 15 May 1948 the British mandate was terminated and the Arab-Israeli war began. Egyptian forces entered Gaza city, which became the headquarters of the Egyptian expeditionary force in Palestine. The area of Egyptian control was reduced by

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the fighting to a narrow strip of coastal territory 25 miles long that became known as the Gaza Strip. Its borders were demarcated in the Egyptian-Israeli armistice of 24 February 1950; its southwest limit was the prewar boundary between Egypt and Palestine.

During the 1948 fighting, the Strip became a haven for Palestinian refugees. Egypt did not annex the territory after the armistice, but administered it through governors

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Between 1949 and 1956 there was a gradual escalation of violence between inhabitants of Gaza and the neighboring Israelis. Israel temporarily occupied the area during the 1956 war, but relinquished control to Egypt in March 1957 under US and UN pressure.

Anti-Israeli activity accelerated in the Strip in the mid-1960s with the formation of the Palestine Liberation Organization. The Palestine Liberation Army, Fatah, and the forerunner of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine were all active in mobilizing the population against Israel up to and during the 1967 war. After the Israelis occupied the Strip in 1967, these groups went underground and used the refugee camps as bases for attacks on the occupation forces. Israel crushed the guerrillas in 1971 and rooted out the PLO organization. Armed resistance has since mostly ceased in the Gaza Strip.

Israel regards the Gaza Strip as an anomaly. In its view it has neither the emotional and historical associations of the West Bank nor is it part of Egypt. But because of its proximity to Israel's populous coastal plain, Israeli leaders strongly believe they must retain some measure of control over the area to prevent it from again becoming a staging base for Palestinian terrorist attacks.

Egypt presently considers Gaza its responsibility until Gaza achieves self-determination as part of an independent Palestinian state or as a self-governing entity. Cairo does

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not include annexation of the Strip among the options available to Egypt, in part because of the large refugee population in Gaza.

Jordan, which took control of and ultimately annexed the West Bank portion of Palestine after the 1948 war, maintains economic links with Gaza, but advances no claims of sovereignty.

Geography

The Gaza Strip is a narrow rectangle of land along the Mediterranean Sea between the Sinai Peninsula and the Israeli border. Only about 25 miles long and four to eight miles wide Gaza's 145 square mile area is slightly more than twice the size of Washington, D.C. Gaza City is 40 miles by road from Tel Aviv, 62 miles from Jerusalem, and about 240 miles from Cairo.

The topography is characterized by sand beaches along a straight shoreline, sand dunes and sparse vegetation in the west, and sandstone ridges in the east. Alluvial soil is found inland which supports citrus plantations and field crops; agriculture is the major economic activity. The small areas of loess soil in the eastern part are the most productive; the soil in the south tends to be saline and more sandy. Coastal areas are covered with sand dunes, though there are some pockets of soil that retain moisture and are cultivable. Water supply is precarious; it is dependent on wells tapping underground aquifers fed by rainfall seepage. Average annual rainfall is about 14 inches.

Gaza has no known commercially exploitable natural resources and no natural harbor.

Human Resources

The Gaza Strip, with about 2,000 persons per square mile according to a 1967 census, is among the more densely populated areas of the world. By comparison, the population density of Bangladesh is about 1,400 persons per square mile.

Gaza's population is estimated to be over 400,000 and growing at an estimated annual rate of 3 percent. The exact growth rate is obscured by the migration of Palestinians to the West Bank and other Arab states.

It is a young population, nearly half under 15 years of age. It contains more females than males, especially in the 20 to 30 age group. Gazan towns--Gaza city (1967 population 87,793), Khan Yunis (1967 population 29,522), and Rafah (1967 population 10,812)--have become artificial urban centers in that they are dense residential areas for native and refugee populations who work elsewhere.

Principal population movements were the influx of Palestinian refugees between 1948 and 1949 and a much smaller exit of these refugees from Gaza since 1967. Present outward movements consist largely of workers commuting daily to jobs in Israel and the West Bank and the temporary migration of young males to study in Arab universities or take jobs in other Arab countries. Over 95 percent of Gazans are Arab and Muslim.

The influx of refugees raised the population from 72,000 in 1946 to 280,000 in 1949; the natural increase of the 1948 refugee population is largely responsible for the area's current population of more than 400,000, of whom the refugees comprise over 80 percent. About 60 percent of the refugees continue to live in the eight camps administered by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA). The camp refugees, especially, remain a distinct social and political element that has not been absorbed into the surrounding communities and continues to regard itself as temporarily separated from its homeland.

Israeli Presence

There are between 500 and 600 Israelis in the Gaza Strip. They are associated with the military government, security, or the five Israeli settlements. A sixth settlement is planned near Katif, but it is not yet occupied.

Israeli settlements are located near main traffic arteries and interspersed at regular intervals between major towns.

Gaza has never been a priority settlement area for Israel. The emphasis since the 1967 war has been on the Jordan Valley and Jerusalem. Settlement activity in the Rafah approaches along the northeastern Sinai coast and in Gaza began about 1971, after armed resistance in the Strip had been crushed.

All Israeli settlements in the occupied territories are administered by the Israeli Defense Force under martial law. Gaza settlements are of two types--the nahal and the moshav. Nahals are paramilitary settlements established by the Nahal (Fighting Pioneer Youth Corps) of the IDF. They are normally converted to civilian status after a few years. Two Gaza nahals, Netzarim and Morag, are exceptions to this rule.

A moshav is a farming community in which each settler has a separate home and works his own piece of land leased from the state. Produce is marketed jointly. There are two moshavs in the Gaza Strip and another under construction, all affiliated with the National Religious Party of Israel.

Social Factors and Welfare

Set against the refugee population is a traditional Gaza social structure--politically conservative, landowning, and with economic links to Israel and Jordan. The Shawwa clan stands above the others in economic and political influence. Its wealth rests on ownership of large portions of Gaza's arable land and control of the citrus export business. The Shawwa clan numbers about 5,000. Its titular head and wealthiest member is 71-year-old Rashif Shawwa. As mayor of Gaza City, he augments the clan's economic power with control of political patronage.

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The religious makeup of the Gaza population is overwhelmingly Muslim. The fewer than 4,000 Christians are mostly Greek Orthodox. The Greek Orthodox community consists largely of educated professionals; it is quite prominent in the Gazan court system. A small Roman Catholic community--250--consists mostly of poor refugees from northern Palestine. The Baptists, supported by foreign funds, manage a major hospital, although the local Baptist community is small.

Medical care and education are adequate and provided by UNRWA to the refugees and by Israel and private charitable groups to both refugees and native Gazans. Educational levels are higher in Gaza than in the West Bank and slightly higher among refugees in Gaza than nonrefugees. UNRWA provides free education to male and female refugee children through the ninth grade. About 50 percent of all Gazans have had five or more years of schooling; 17 percent have 11 or more years of schooling. Each year several hundred students attend vocational schools operated by UNRWA or by Israel. Of the 10,000 Palestinian students studying at Egyptian universities in 1977, 9,000 were from Gaza. The Egyptian curriculum is used in Gaza, and access to Egyptian universities is an important factor in sustaining Egyptian influence in Gaza.

Local health conditions are typical of those in a developing society--high fertility, high mortality rates, and poor sanitation. UNRWA and WHO maintain good health conditions in the UNRWA refugee camps. Food appears to be available in sufficient quantity and quality.

The Economic Setting

Gaza's economy has grown rapidly in the past decade. Per capita annual income is estimated at \$500 to \$700.

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(Jordan's is near \$500 and Egypt's around \$300.) Growth of real gross national product since 1968 has averaged an impressive 14 percent annually.*

The rise of the standard of living in Gaza is less a product of economic development than a derivative of full employment and worker remittances from abroad. Full employment became possible after 1968 when Israel allowed Gaza's surplus labor to work in Israel, mostly as unskilled day laborers in the construction and agricultural sectors. An estimated 25 to 30 percent of Gaza's gross national product is attributable to remittances from these workers.

Such unemployment as does exist in Gaza is centered, ironically, among the better educated, because the demand in Israel is for cheap unskilled labor.

Trade patterns--During the 1948 war Gaza was cut off from its natural hinterland, which became part of Israel. Economic links were then forged with Egypt, which at that time administered the territory. After the 1967 Israeli occupation of Gaza economic ties again shifted. The old links to Egypt were reduced, and a gradual integration of Gaza's economy with that of Israel's began. Gaza became a source of cheap labor and a protected market for Israeli manufactured goods.

Israel has also become a market for Gazan agricultural exports. Exports to Israel have jumped threefold since 1974. Gaza's communication, transport, and power systems are now tied to the Israeli systems. Differences remain in the areas of tax and finance.

*GNP measures total output of an economy, all goods produced and all services rendered. GDP, by contrast, excludes income earned abroad by residents of a territory--a particularly important factor in the case of the Gaza Strip--and overseas investment income.

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Jordan is economically important to Gaza because it is the funnel through which Gaza markets its citrus crop in the Arab world.

Gaza's inflation rate--25 to 30 percent annually--is somewhat lower than that experienced by Israel. Most of the inflation is attributable to the economic links that have evolved with Israel. Most goods and services are purchased from Israel, and higher wage rates in Israel have forced up wages in Gaza.

Agriculture is Gaza's most important economic sector, accounting for 26 percent of employment, 28 percent of the gross domestic product, and about 90 percent of all export earnings. Industry is mostly restricted to traditional crafts, small workshops, and assembly operations for Israeli manufacturers.

Political Dynamics

Gaza is administered by an Israeli military governor assisted by 130 civilian technical personnel and 150 Israeli Defense Force personnel who supervise a local police force of several hundred.

Gaza has no elected officials--the last election was in 1964--and organized political activity is banned. Local government is provided by Arab mayors in four municipalities and seven villages, each assisted by a council. Mayors and councilmen are appointed by the Israeli governor.

The governor meets regularly with about 30 Gazan notables, the mayors, and the heads of the city councils. Israel allows Gazan officials some leeway in local matters and patronage power in return for a degree of cooperation. The officials are wary of appearing openly to be doing Israel's bidding because Gazans tolerate but do not accept Israeli rule.

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Because political organizations are banned, most political activity takes place in ostensibly nonpolitical societies. The Benevolent Society for the Welfare of Gaza Strip Inhabitants is probably the most important of these because it is run by the Shawwa family and represents the interests of the conservative traditional elite.

Rashid Shawwa, Mayor of Gaza City, is the most prominent member of the Shawwa clan, though younger members are taking an increasingly important decisionmaking role. He acts as Jordan's unofficial representative in Gaza. He derives considerable political leverage from his control of permits for shipping goods to Jordan and of the Jordanian passports and identity papers that are necessary to travel from Israel or the occupied territories. Shawwa was first appointed mayor by Israel in 1971, but was dismissed in 1972. He was reappointed in 1975.

The mayor is a pragmatist who clearly recognizes that he is a bit player in a high stakes game in the Middle East. He has so far managed to walk a narrow line between the conflicting demands of the Israeli occupation and his constituents, mostly by cultivating an improved image with the PLO.

The mayor's economic interests--and those of his clan and other traditionalist backers--are built on the export of citrus products, mostly to Jordan, with lesser exports to Israel and Europe. Shawwa favors a federation of Gaza and the West Bank with Jordan. He has said that a resolution of the Palestinian question must include an internationally guaranteed corridor between Gaza and the West Bank. He looks to Egypt only for trade and education and not for political links. Shawwa has indicated he would accept, as an interim step, Palestinian self-rule under the supervision of the UN or the US for a period of four to five years to prove that a small Palestinian state represents no threat to Israel.

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Shawwa and his supporters must be very tempted by the offer contained in the Camp David accords to join Egypt and Israel in negotiating autonomy for Gaza. Participation would entail great personal and political risk if the PLO opposed, but it would also offer Shawwa the prospect of preserving his clan's power at the expense of younger, more radical political rivals whose base is in the refugee community. The Mayor's final position is likely to be determined by his reading of the attitude of King Husayn, the PLO leadership, and the Saudis. The pro-PLO and anti-Camp David accord forces in Gaza are the dominant voice at present, in part because of their tactics of intimidation. Shawwa, typically, has managed to keep a foot in both camps, but it seems doubtful that he would be willing to stand alone with Sadat and against both the PLO and Jordan on so explosive an issue as negotiations with Israel.

Pro-PLO Sentiment

A major consideration for Rashid Shawwa must be the attitude of the over 300,000 Palestinian refugees in Gaza. Most are pro-PLO, and it is doubtful that an effective governing body could be formed without their cooperation. Pro-PLO Gazans tend to repeat publicly the hardline PLO position opposing Camp David, but we suspect some are concerned about being left behind by the peace process. A small Gazan delegation in early October pressed PLO leader Arafat to allow them to participate in peace talks. They argued that the process is likely to move forward, and it was better that they speak for Gazans than someone chosen by Israel or Egypt. The delegation presented the same arguments to King Husayn. Both Husayn and Arafat appear to have given ambiguous answers rather than the approval the delegation hoped for.

The exact strength of pro-PLO sentiment in Gaza is difficult to measure. Israel destroyed the formal PLO organization in the camps during its crackdown in 1971, and it is not likely to allow a reestablishment as long as Israel has a political role in the territory. Some covert organization may still be present.

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The PLO viewpoint today is often expressed through the Red Crescent Society, the Muslim counterpart of the Red Cross. The society is led by two native Gazans who were former members of the PLO Supreme Council of Gaza, Dr. Haydar Abd al-Shafi and Ibrahim Abu Sitah.

Abd al-Shafi is president of the Red Crescent and on the board of trustees for Bir Zeit University, the only four-year university on the West Bank and a center of PLO support. Abd al-Shafi is a longtime political rival of Rashid Shawwa. He severed his official connection with the PLO in the early 1970s in order to avoid being deported from Gaza by the Israelis.

Abu Sitah is another longtime PLO official and a former member of the Executive Committee of the Palestine National Congress. Israel linked him to bombings in 1969 and deported him from Gaza. He remains active in Gazan affairs and is believed to have been allowed to return to Gaza.

Other sources of pro-PLO sentiment in Gaza are Zuhair el-Rayyes, a lawyer and editor of the pro-PLO Jerusalem daily, al-Fajr, and Fayyez abu Rahme, head of the Gazan bar association. El Rayyes is a friend of Rahme [redacted] and a close collaborator of al-Shafi. El Rayyes' family reportedly controlled Gazan politics during the Egyptian occupation when many of the Shawwa family were imprisoned. 25X1

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Pro-Egyptian Sentiment

Pro-Egyptian opinion in Gaza is much less strong than pro-PLO opinion. It is fostered by Gazan access to Egyptian universities and by an overriding desire to end the Israeli occupation, which translates into support for Sadat's peace policies. Shawwa clan leaders and some mayors support Sadat's peace initiative, though political realities preclude their publicly taking that position. Sheik Hashim al-Khazeidar, the Imam of Gaza, is Sadat's most outspoken

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supporter, and he led a delegation to Cairo following Sadat's trip to Jerusalem. Rashid Shawwa refused to participate unless the PLO approved. They did not and instead accused Khazeidar of being an "Israeli stooge." Israel has indeed boosted Khazeidar--they appointed him imam--and he has little standing in Gazan politics.

UNRWA

The local Arab administrators of the UNRWA program, who are relatively free of both Israeli influence and that of the traditional power structure, constitute another political force in Gaza. The UNRWA group's importance would probably increase if Gaza were faced with the practical problems of self-government because UNRWA has the experience and machinery to administer the area.

Local UNRWA officials are drawn almost exclusively from among the refugees. They preside over a multimillion dollar operation that is in constant touch with the population through the administration of schools and hospitals; control of housing, food, and vocational training; and the dispensation of considerable patronage. It is the most thoroughly organized, largest, and best funded administrative structure in the Strip.

UNRWA was established in December 1949 by the United Nations General Assembly to assist persons in the Gaza area, West Bank, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria who were displaced by the Arab-Israeli conflict. Field work began in May 1950. The agency serves all eligible refugees whether or not they live in the camps. UNRWA services are supplied directly to individuals, not through the governing authority.

US Presence

The US has no official presence in Gaza, but it is active in providing aid through the UN and various private relief agencies. US assistance for the West Bank and Gaza

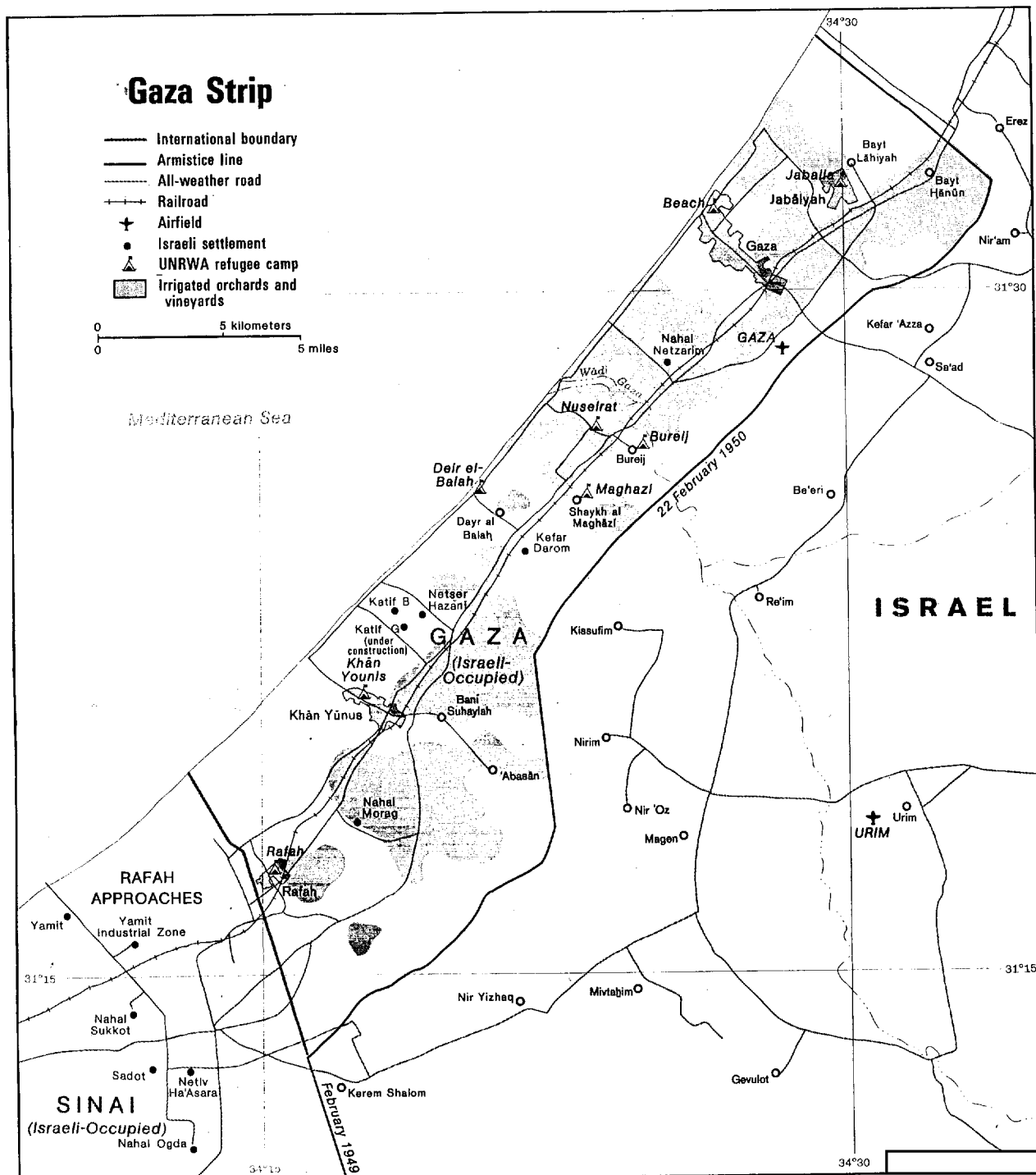
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began in fiscal year 1975 under the Middle East Special Requirements Fund, established after the 1973 war. Funding for West Bank and Gaza development projects has in recent years been set at \$3 million.

The aid program is a bilateral US-Arab effort, and assistance is channeled through US voluntary agencies, not the Israeli Government. The principal agencies involved are the Catholic Relief Services and the American Near East Refugee Aid.

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